ARTICLE

The Exterminationist Mindset: Heinrich Himmler's October 1943 Speeches

In October 1943, SS leader Heinrich Himmler gave two speeches, showing the full depravity of the exterminationist mindset.

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Top Photo: Heinrich Himmler lectures to a group of SS officers (the image is taken from an album of SS photographs). Date (sometime between 1936 and 1944) and location unknown. Credit: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Gift of Estelle Bechoefer.

Oratory and war have been inextricably linked at least since Pericles's famed funeral oration. World War II was no exception to this tradition. In the United States and the United Kingdom, quotations from the speeches of President *Franklin Delano Roosevelt* and Prime Minister Winston Churchill continually reappear in the public spheres of the two countries and still inspire with their calls to defend democracy and freedom against fascism.

It is undeniable that there also existed powerful oratorical currents in the Axis states. Fascist movements often created massive spectacles to showcase the spoken word and to elevate their leaders to demigod status. Most notably, in Nazi Germany, the venomous speeches streaming from the mouths of *Adolf Hitler* and Joseph Goebbels, with their

ultranationalism, racism, and militarism, galvanized followers, imbued with what German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno later called "the authoritarian personality."

Alongside these public incitements was a torrent of clandestine utterances. Some like Hitler's speech to the *Gauleiter* (Nazi Party district leaders) in Berlin on December 12, 1941, after his declaration of war on the United States or his table conversations have become a key part of the historical record of the Third Reich. *Reichsführer*-SS Heinrich Himmler, typically not regarded as a charismatic speaker, delivered, nonetheless, one of the most significant speeches made in this vein by a Nazi during World War II. On October 4, 1943, Himmler addressed a gathering of SS-*Gruppenführer*, high-ranking officials of that elite National Socialist organization, at a hotel in the city of Posen (since 1945 Poznań, Poland). There he revealed and confirmed in some horrifying detail *the genocide of European Jews*.

The city of Posen had a long and fractious history having been one of the sites of contestation between Prussia and Poland before Prussia annexed it in 1793, following the second partition of Poland. Absorbed into the larger German Empire in 1871, it remained German until 1918, when it became part of the Second Polish Republic. Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939 brought Posen back under German control—the city became the capital of a newly created administrative area called the *Warthegau*. Is it really surprising that Himmler chose Posen, long in a border region fought over for centuries and subject since 1939 to the brutal policies of *Gauleiter* Arthur Greiser, to communicate with his fanatically depraved cronies about the Nazi dictatorship's secret and systematic extermination of an entire people?

SLAVS AND RACIAL SUBJUGATION

Before dealing with the content of Himmler's October 4 speech, it is important to flesh out some essential aspects of its context. An uprising had taken place in the *Treblinka extermination camp* on August 2, 1943, when some 60 to 100 Jews escaped that site of mass murder. A month before the speech, Himmler, recoiling from the retreat of German forces in Ukraine, ordered that the Red Army "must truly find a totally burned and destroyed landscape" as it moved to reclaim Ukrainian territory.*[i]* He and the Third Reich's leadership sensed that the war had entered a new phase of waning German fortunes. Yet, as his comments to his beloved SS men indicate, Himmler evinced no sign of pulling back from the policies of mass subjugation and annihilation so tied already to his name.

According to Peter Longerich, Himmler spoke for several hours.*[ii]* The transcript of the speech, Steve Hochstadt claims, stretches to 116 pages in length. For my purposes here, the excerpts of the speech available in a volume of source materials on the Holocaust edited by Hochstadt will suffice.*[iii]*

Chilling in every sentence, Himmler's October 1943 speech drags the reader into the rancid depths of the exterminationist mindset. His comments remind us that there was a core of the Nazi leadership who absorbed the murderous elements of Hitler's antisemitism, transmitted them downward to eager disciples, and operationalized them, starting in 1941–42.

Reichsfuehrer-SS Heinrich Himmler poses outside among other SS officers. Photo: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of James Blevins

"A basic rule for the SS man must hold absolutely: honest, decent, loyal, and comradely must we be to members of our own blood and to nobody else," Himmler stressed. With an eye to the war against Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union, he rummaged through an array of coarse stereotypes about Russians. They might exhibit piety, were capable of hard work, and were proficient with technology. At the same time, Himmler proclaimed how endemic laziness, mendaciousness, and brutality were in Russia. He not only resorted to stereotypes—his speech also certified the validity of racial stereotyping as the basis of action for the SS.

Russians, Czechs, and other Slavs, Himmler resumed, possessed no inherent value as human beings. For the SS, these "human animals" were only valuable insofar as they

labored under the lordship of the superior Aryan Germans: "If while building a tank ditch, 10,000 Russian women die from weakness or not, that interests me only insofar as the tank ditch is built for Germany." He did not flinch from stating, "whatever good blood of our kind exists in these people, we should take by stealing the children, if necessary, and raising them ourselves." Himmler's personnel were engaged in heinous acts of stealing children in Poland in the hopes of salvaging the "good blood" for the Nazi racial community. The language of subhumanity wielded to depict Slavs here cannot be detached from the knowledge that millions had already perished in Eastern Europe prior to Himmler's visit to Posen. And roughly 15 million Soviet citizens in total would die during the Second World War.

"A VERY DIFFICULT TOPIC"

In his remarks, Himmler transitioned to what he warned his audience was a "very difficult topic." "Among ourselves," he made clear, "it should be expressed once very candidly, even though we will never speak publicly about it." The statements intimated that those in attendance were now privy to some candor they were not accustomed to usually.

What is astonishing here is how quickly Himmler moved in and out of official Nazi jargon to speak bluntly about genocide (a word, it should be remembered, that is not coined by Raphael Lemkin until the year after Himmler's speeches). "I mean now the Jewish evacuation (*Evakuierung*)"—the term "evacuation" had been openly utilized by the terror apparatus to refer, euphemistically, to the deportation of Jews to camps in Eastern Europe, supposedly to undertake labor for the Reich. But within an instant, Himmler, casting aside the approved language that he helped to craft, just said it: "the extermination (*Ausrottung*) of the Jewish people." This had been an order, like the Night of the Long Knives of June 1934, which asked the utmost of the SS man's sense of duty.

The line of perverse reasoning Himmler unfolded in this speech undercut any notion, though, that the "extermination of the Jewish people" was solely about duty and following difficult orders. Not sparing his listeners any gruesome details, Himmler dwelled on the mass murder of Jews conducted over the previous two years. Without showing a shred of sympathy for the murdered, he sympathized with the challenges the SS had faced carrying out this "very difficult" mission: "Most of you know what it means when 100 corpses lie together, when 500 lie there or when 1,000 lie there." He accented the sacrifice and selflessness of those under his command (and complained bitterly about how everyday Germans would each identify a Jew who was not like other Jews). "This is a never written and never to be written page of glory in our history," he maintained. The elite SS would never receive the credit from the German nation for executing this most onerous of tasks—physically eliminating all individuals of Jewish descent perceived as the Aryan race's ultimate nemesis. They had implemented what they were told to do and "still remained decent, that has made us hard." If Jews, whom he compared to germs, had been permitted to live, they would now act as partisans, sabotaging Germany's war effort. As guardians of this new racist order, built on millions of corpses, Himmler before his men could laud the SS for having fulfilled "this hardest

task out of love to our people." The monstrosity, the obscenity, the insidiousness of these sentences, among the vilest ever uttered, test the limits of comprehensibility.

Concluding his speech with a slavish paean to Hitler, "who created the Germanic Reich and who will lead us into the Germanic future," Himmler wrapped up the meeting. He was far from done, however, in highlighting and justifying the annihilation of Europe's Jews.

Two days later, on October 6 at Posen City Hall, Himmler addressed an assemblage of *Gauleiter*. He seized the opportunity to revisit the subject of the mass murder of Jews. Trying to make the issue one of his own inner struggles, he asserted that "the Jewish question" had been "the most difficult question I've had to face in my life." Demonstrating the same lack of restraint from October 4, he talked about—and defended—the slaughter of Jewish children and women. Mercy could not be granted.

> *"For I did not consider myself justified in exterminating the men—in other words, killing them or having them killed—and then allowing their children to grow up to wreak vengeance on our children and grandchildren. The difficult decision had to be taken to make these people disappear from the face of the earth. For the organization that had to carry out this duty it was the most difficult that we have ever had to undertake."[iv]*

Demands for understanding for what he and his men had gone through Himmler coupled with a logic of absolute exclusion and enmity for Jews. They had to all be wiped out without pity. These two speeches bespeak the full depravity of the Nazi exterminationist mindset. Roughly a week after them, an uprising by Jews incarcerated in *the Sobibór death camp* liberated almost 60 people. Swiftly, Himmler responded with more barbarity. Tens of thousands of Jews in Poland were executed as part of Operation Harvest Festival and, to cover massive crimes against humanity already perpetrated, *the Operation Reinhard camps* were dismantled.

Mass extermination did not remotely slow down as the war turned against Hitler and Himmler. In fact, just the opposite occurred. Himmler's accounts of why this was necessary and moral in his demented ethical universe, exemplified in his October 1943 speeches in Posen, cannot be studied enough.

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▼ References:

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